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Abstract

They really began going to the coffee shop after their neighbours stopped visiting them, and then more desperately just after that last appearance Poh Sim's mother made. They went when the house became silent because there was no child to run around overturning chairs or knocking into doorknobs and the sharp edges of the kitchen cabinets. When the worry about the child being there when she turned round with a pot of hot water, from the stove, or of having the skin peeled off by the exhaust pipe just after he had parked the motorbike, was never going to come.

K.S. MANIAM

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They really began going to the coffee shop after their neighbours stopped visiting them, and then more desperately just after that last appearance Poh Sim's mother made. They went when the house became silent because there was no child to run around overturning chairs or knocking into doorknobs and the sharp edges of the kitchen cabinets. When the worry about the child being there when she turned round with a pot of hot water, from the stove, or of having the skin peeled off by the exhaust pipe just after he had parked the motorbike, was never going to come.

Ah Seng had been in the house when her mother and sisters came. He had risen from the second-hand armchair to receive them, but they had stood just inside the small hall, as if to get a better view of Poh Sim with all that light falling on her from the doorway.

'Nothing will come from you,' her mother said, her look travelling from Poh Sim's face down to her feet. 'Not even a girl-child!'

Even as they were leaving, Poh Sim was already withdrawing into herself. The look on her mother's face had said that she would never have the child she had never been.

Her sisters had always forced her to stay hidden behind their skirts; they were the first to speak to visitors, whether relatives or strangers. They were always there, her sisters, in front of her, even in their parents' presence, the father always dressed in his immaculately ironed shirt and trousers, and the mother fussing over the smallest stain on the coffee table. Her father looked at her as at some misshapen thing, with avoidance. Her mother looked at her with the disgust for something that couldn't have come from her body; or she glanced past her, as if ashamed of something that couldn't have come from her family. Poh Sim was just action, a doing they wouldn't see, an obeying her parents and sisters expected. She prepared the meals, washed the clothes, swept the house, and when her sisters waded back from their friend's house on a rainy day, even cleaned their muddy slippers. She was something on which they hung their clothes, something which was there and not there.

Then Ah Seng had come, and picked her out from her sisters. When his gaze rested on her, something stirred inside her, something like blood or maybe something like tears.

At the wedding, people didn't look at her dress or makeup; they only looked at her as if probing deep into her flesh. Ah Seng kept looking at her, as if to share with her his swelling sense of pride. She sat beside him feeling something

like beauty flowing through her blood. Even her parents smiled at her as she lifted her dress above her big and knobby ankles to come down the dais and follow Ah Seng to the decorated bridal car; but her sisters' faces were fungus-covered stone, like the walls of the bathroom, where she had washed their clothes or slippers.

When she passed the red-bannered doorway and into Ah Seng's modest house, she was ready to start the life she had never lived. Ah Seng, with the money he had saved up for the wedding, and all that would follow, surrounded her with red during the first month of their marriage: red eggs, pig's blood cooked with chilli and pepper, the red cockerel. And there had been her own blood, which had smeared the bed sheets during those first few nights. Her new neighbours came to visit her often, their faces filled with wondering sympathy for her and Ah Seng. Even her sisters dropped by, wanting to know. But the months passed, and nothing happened. And the visitors trickled away into a noticeable absence.

Then her mother and her sisters had come with that look that curdled the slip and tumble of that strange beauty she had begun to feel, lately, within her.

'We still have ourselves,' Ah Seng said, touching her shoulder.

Poh Sim didn't look up, deciding she would grow her hair long and hide inside its darkness so that even Ah Seng wouldn't see her.

Ah Seng was patient; he talked to her, he soothed her, but he couldn't reach into her through the touch of his hands or his words. Lying in bed at night, beside all that turned-away flesh, he racked his mind on how to get Poh Sim out of the darkness where she hid herself. He remembered the time his family had piled insult after insult on him, and a darkness had come to press upon him. He had gone, in desperation, to the temple he remembered going to with his parents, when they were still pious, and lighted some joss-sticks, moving his lips as if in prayer, the bald priest watching him all the time. When he turned to go, the priest with the mesmerizing stare came up to him, and laying a hand on his shoulder, said, 'You're in trouble. But you'll be shown the way out.' As he cycled away, he remembered watching, as a child, the bald priest with the piercing stare lay his hand on the shoulders of women who couldn't give birth, and in difficult cases, throwing a dice and writing down a Chinese character on yellow paper for them to keep next to their breasts, and they returning several months later, round-bellied and their faces shining with happiness.

It was after that visit to the temple that he had found himself in the eyes of the young woman, the daughter of the hardware shop owner, and in the eyes of the customers.

He had tried several jobs by then, which the family thought only brought more shame to its name. He had dropped out of school while his brothers and gone into business, journalism or teaching. His sisters married early, and only showed up on the second day of Chinese New Year. And he had remained inside that thing his parents, brothers, and especially his sisters, had made for him. The thing that said he was a good-for-nothing, the thing that said no one would respect him, the thing that said that he should be ashamed of himself.

He switched jobs again, and went to work in a hardware shop. At first, he changed into a pair of brown shorts and a T-shirt the minute he got there, and stood at the side of the shop, among bags of cement, barrels of changkul and broom handles, rolls of wire and nylon netting, and towers of plastic pails and basins. When a customer made some purchases, he carried them out to the lorry or van or car; and he shovelled sand from the mountain-like piles into the backs of larger lorries. He hunted for long-forgotten or mislaid items among the wooden boxes in the dark and crowded back of the shop. He cleaned rusty files, saws and hammers, oiled them, and made them glisten again. And he laboriously labelled the various shelves. By the time the end of his workday came, he was as dusty as the road that fronted the shop, and he had to pour water over himself in the urine-charged bathroom and change into his trousers and shirt, before cycling home.

But his mother didn't respect him though he gave his wages to her; his father didn't even look at him. He hated it the most when his elder sister came with her children, the boys lugging their schoolbags, their hair still wet from their bath, and the girls wearing fancy dresses, looking like the dolls he had seen in the Western-style shops in the city. 'This one old for his age,' his sister said. 'That one too smart. That girl have many boys waiting already. The young one already know piano. Some people I know have nothing.' And she had looked straight at him, she who never even went to the temple!

Back at the shop, the following day he forgot to change into his work clothes. The shop owner's daughter, looking shyly at him from behind the wide, abraded and chipped counter, didn't send him to the shelves in the dark at the back. The customers shook their heads when he wanted to take their purchases out to their vehicles. They went to him first, not the owner's daughter; they told him what they wanted. And he spoke to the young woman behind that scarred counter; she wrote down what he said, and shouted to some workers. And he thought, 'She's writing down my words. She's changing my words into action. This is respect!'

He had come out of the thing!

He went to the priest, on his way to work, the following morning. The priest took one look at him, and said, 'You and your wife in trouble.'

'You've to help us,' Ah Seng said, not flinching under the priest's piercing stare.

'Give me your full names.'

When Ah Seng did, the priest brought out some sheets of paper, threw a dice several times, referred to a book, and calligraphed each sheet with a Chinese character.

'Bad blood inside and outside you,' the priest said. 'Must let in fresh blood. Need reflection, physical and mental. Need to reflect on others and be reflected by others. Must be others before being yourselves. Must become object before becoming your own subject. The reflections will make more reflections. Then nothingness.'

'What does reflection mean?'

The priest gave him that mesmerizing stare, once more, mysterious and flaying. He had spread out the sheets before Ah Seng, as he recited and briefly explained each character; now he placed them in order, the last first, and made them into a multi-layered packet. He handed the packet to Ah Seng, and said, 'Once she reaches a stage in the reflection, you've to take out the correct sheet, fold it, and put it away in a box. After the last sheet has been reached, you've to burn all the papers in front of the family altar. This knowledge only for you two. If others guess it increases the potency.'

'How do I begin?' Ah Seng said.

'The way will show itself,' the priest. 'Out of confusion comes knowledge.'

He mulled over the priest's words at work in the hardware shop, among the dull nails and sharp files, but they still didn't make any sense to him. On the way home, he stopped at the coffee shop where he and Poh Sim, finding the loneliness at home unbearable, had had dinner on some nights. Sometimes they had sat, late into the night, like outsiders — the other customers avoided looking at them — observing the goings-on at the other tables, he over a Stout, and she over a Milo, before going home to a barren bed.

He ordered a bottle of beer this time and sat staring before him.

'Confusion!' he muttered to himself. 'Reflections, object, subject, nothingness! The priest isn't a priest this time. He's just making a joke of me!'

'You talking to me, Mister?' someone from the next table, said.

When he turned towards the voice, he saw a neatly dressed young man looking at him, as did a few people from the other tables, with a mild curiosity.

He shook his head at the stranger. Why hadn't he thought of that? He drank the beer with relish, slowly, contemplatively, and then rode home, the warm evening air turning cold against his excitement.

Until they started frequenting it, the coffee shop was all business and movement: the coffee shop 'boys', really men, at least one of them shuffling about like a zombie, went the round of the drink-enclosure, table and counter, like satellites around some invisible sun. At the tables, customers sat singly or in groups, in self-imposed solitude or self-imposed camaraderie. There was that group of Chinese construction workers, painters and finishers (these men brought the plastering of walls to a fine smoothness), who, cement-splattered and paint-smeared, began moulting their work-skins before going back to their families. One of them sat cross-legged on the chair, as if folding his legs away for the day; another let his arms dangle by his sides, acknowledging their uselessness until the following morning. A noisy bunch of Indians came in, only to grow nosier as they emptied bottle after bottle of Stout. There was about these people a quiet desperation, as if going home was going back into some dimness that smothered them.

That first day at the coffee shop, after he had confided, uncertainly, the meaning of the priest's words to Poh Sim, Ah Seng took out a framed photograph from his shoulder bag, and showed it to her.

'You like it?'

'I not there,' Poh Sim said, only seeing the darkness her mother and sisters had put into her.

‘You always there,’ Ah Seng said. ‘For me.’

But Poh Sim only withdrew deeper into her hair.

A snigger came from the counter, where a boy had been poring over his books beside his mother, the shop owner.

‘Look! Look!’ the boy said.

‘What to look?’ the proprietress said, cuffing him on the shoulder. ‘You only want to forget your books!’

Then she looked up, and saw a middle-aged man, shirt sticking to his sucked in belly, cheek bones shiny against the gathering dusk, holding out a photograph to a woman, who spilled all over the chair; the proprietress quickly returned to concentrate on the money in the cash-register.

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers a few tables away, repulsed, tried to not even glance in their direction.

The next time Ah Seng and Poh Sim went to the coffee shop, it was late evening, and the tables were already filling. A group of girls came and occupied a table not far from them, girls who may have just got into work or were the daughters of rich people. They might as well have been on another planet; they giggled hysterically, and kept calling for drinks and bowls of noodles, unaware of anything except themselves. They glistened with the flesh of the careless young, showing here a midriff, there a cleavage and elsewhere pale, casually spread-out thighs. The cement-layer self-consciously peeled off some dried splotches on his sleeves; the finisher scraped at the paint that skinned his palms. The Indians ordered another bottle of Stout, their talk grazing at arms, breasts and thighs.

‘Come out of your hair, and see,’ Ah Seng said.

She raised her head, and saw the men gazing at and grazing on the flesh of those young women. And she recalled the glow she had felt when Ah Seng had gazed at her in the same way, that time, some years ago, and picked her out from her sisters.

The proprietress looked up when she heard her son’s snigger. Poh Sim wasn’t wearing her baggy pants and shabby blouse. Instead, she wore a tank top and a calf-length skirt. Most important of all, she had cut her hair so her face could be seen! The proprietress tried not to smile, and kept cuffing her son on the shoulder to stop him from laughing. But they became still when Ah Seng came. He wore a well-ironed shirt and neatly creased trousers, and a young man’s smile on his face.

He moved with a newly discovered sense of purpose, and was at Poh Sim’s side before she had time to look up at him with surprise. Nevertheless, she did, the surprise sitting on her pudgy face with an unaccustomed grace. And she smiled, her lipsticked and, for some reason, swollen lips parting with breathless expectation. Ah Seng smiled at her, and pulled the chair closer to her side before sitting down. He took her hand, caressed it with shy pleasure, and almost brought it to his lips in cavalier fashion, then shaking his head, put it back gently on the table. Poh Sim sat there, a mannequin, quivering under the siege of strange feelings that the stares from the other tables pinned on her.

The coffee shop itself seemed to shine with a new light. The harshness of the fluorescent tubes fell away into the background as the faces at the other tables filled out with curiosity and puzzled gazing. The proprietress, subdued, went softly about her work at the counter; and she didn't raise her hand to cuff her son when he ignored his books, and looked at the couple. The construction workers who should have pushed back their chairs and departed, lingered. The Stout drinkers held back their vulgar talk, and looked at themselves meekly, as if tasting wonder for the first time. The regular woman diner, who shovelled food into her mouth, ate with more restraint. The businessmen's discussion of business hung in mid-air; the office workers' giggles froze in the midst of that day's gossip; the several families, seated eagerly round gourmet expectations, stayed their appetites; and the detached academic and his restrained children looked up from the mini-chess-set they brought to the coffee shop. The waiter stood, caught by the unexpected daze that hung over the tables, patiently waiting for the customers to return to their ordering.

Ah Seng looked about himself with appreciation, but Poh Sim only sat there trembling with fear. Ah Seng turned to her and whispered encouragement, but she only kept her head down and tried to stretch her skirt farther down her legs. Ah Seng suddenly bent down and brought out a ribbon-tied packet of yellow paper from his shoulder bag, tapped on it, and mumbled explanations. Then their heads came together in some kind of a ritual closeness, and all the customers heard was a whispered urgency. When they finally stirred out of their mesmerizing stillness and left, Poh Sim still trembling, the other customers, the businessmen, middle-class office and private sector workers and their families, and the academic and his children, began to talk, with unnatural loudness, as if released from some primeval emotion.

When she heard the snigger at her elbow, the proprietress cuffed her son on the shoulder.

'Don't make fun!' she said. 'They're bringing the customers.'

She had seen the man, the other time, the customers watching intently, draw out a sheet from the yellow, calligraphed packet, and put it away in the box, which he had also brought out from his shoulder bag.

Poh Sim sat, as she had done the first time, but now spilling out of her tank top, the black band of cloth, standing in for her bra, barely doing the job, waiting for Ah Seng. She had bitten her lips until they were red, as Ah Seng had asked her, to make the blood come. The proprietress turned away, suddenly shy, but the boy pulled at her sleeve, nodding towards the table. Ah Seng had come, with a mixed bouquet of flowers in his hand. Poh Sim looked up, her eyes glinting, and then ducked into her shyness.

'You can't be like this, Poh Sim,' Ah Seng said. 'You must take.'

She shook her head.

'I look everywhere for the flowers,' he went on. 'Just take, lah.'

The proprietress and the people at the other tables, watched, forks, spoons and chopsticks paused over steaming dishes. Would she shake her head again? Ah Seng sat down close to her, and took her hand, but unlike the other time, he brought it to his lips and kissed the palm. The proprietress' son sniggered, but

she turned and cuffed him. She watched them for a while, a smile on her lips, remembering the time her would-be husband had fumbled shyly for her hand. She turned to her son, and this time impulsively rumbled his hair. He, puzzled, bent down over his books.

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers, forgetting the lateness of the hour, watched Ah Seng and Poh Sim and, in spite of themselves, rubbed their chins or the rim of their glasses, vaguely moved.

The people at the other tables rested their fingers on the thin paper napkins or stained forks and spoons, watching, then sighed and returned to their meals and conversations, as if they had not been interrupted at all.

Poh Sim had accepted; she held the bouquet, wrapped in ordinary newspaper and tied with a faded ribbon, for a while, then placed it with quivering hands at her side. Ah Seng bent down, brought out the yellow packet and box, and put away another sheet of paper, then looked at Poh Sim with admiration. When they left, they glowed as if with recaptured youth, and the people at the other tables looked at each other, their faces gleaming with incomprehensible yearning and nostalgia. The construction workers pulled back their chairs, roughly, as if angry with themselves, and went towards their motorcycles; the Stout drinkers gazed at the empty table as at some youthful reassurance suddenly removed from them.

The next time Poh Sim arrived first, wearing a dark dress, a wedding present from Ah Seng, but now too tight, and sat waiting for him. He came later, bearing a single rose, and a gift wrapped up in red paper. The proprietress cast more than the usual glances in their direction. Her son didn't snigger; he looked at them as if his books didn't interest him any more. The other tables, swollen with more than the usual crowd, kept gazing at them, as if waiting for some forgotten feeling to be drawn out from deep inside them.

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had racked their minds for something that would let them into the reflection they saw on the faces in the coffee shop; they recalled their earlier sojourns there, and suddenly memories had come to them, redolent with ritual intimacies and heart-wringing gestures.

'Good sign,' Ah Seng said. 'This is reflecting.'

'We shouldn't do this!' Poh Sim said.

'We're only being others before being ourselves,' Ah Seng said. 'Mustn't forget the priest's words.'

When Poh Sim saw the faces at the other tables, the last traces of her resistance crumbled: they were turned in her direction, with a curiosity as open as an invitation into their midst. She also recalled Ah Seng's words, 'Don't let your mother's and sisters' bad blood stay inside you. Must find fresh blood.'

Oh, that Ah Seng, she thought, waiting, with the warmth of all those eyes on her, he always thinking so of me! Why his mother never know his affectionate heart?

When he placed the red rose before her, she picked it up with oohs and aahs, as she had seen the other woman do some time ago in the coffee shop. She looked up at Ah Seng, her eyes watering, hoping they were bright with her gratitude. Then she put down the flower — he had bought this one, not plucked

it off some bush — and straightened herself so that her own flesh seemed to fall away, and some other flesh had come to inhabit her body.

The proprietress' face was already softening with some nostalgia; and the faces at the other tables were melting away into the hidden regions of themselves. That was when Ah Seng snapped his finger, as the other man, the husband, had done, and a waiter hurried from the kitchen to their table.

The people at the other tables were already watching, as if looking into something inside themselves they didn't know was there. Ah Seng curved his hand, as the other man with his pale and smooth hands had done, to make a bowl, turned his thumb into a spout of water, and wriggled his fingers into heat. Like the other man, he didn't say a word. The waiter came out of his confusion and nodded vigorously, and went and fetched the things. And then it was her turn. She held the chopsticks and porcelain bowl with the tips of her fingers, as if they were dirty objects, then dipping them in the bowl of hot water, moved them around. Then she wiped them with a paper napkin and placed them beside their plates.

Then she sat back, bit her lips, and gazed at a task well done. Ah Seng patted her on her plump hand, and held out the gift over the steaming dishes the waiter had placed on their table. Poh Sim leaned back, and clasped her hands in delight, and once again gazed at Ah Seng, as the other woman had done, as if she had seen no other man like him.

'Why you do this?' Poh Sim said, not knowing the exact words the other woman had used.

'You must take,' Ah Seng said, substituting his own words for the man's.

The proprietress froze at the cash-register; her nostalgia turned into remembrance. She recalled the barren couple that had celebrated the wife's birthday right there in the coffee shop. He had rung her up, and said he wanted a special menu. Did she have that? And flowers. Did she know anything about flowers? She who had been standing behind the counter only a few months, could only gasp into the mouthpiece. What was that? Oh, never mind, he would bring them himself, and he had come with some roses and a gift. The proprietress looked at the couple once again, with a brooding sympathy, and then stiffened with pride thinking of how she had built that invisible world of hers, changing into a new dress everyday, borrowing some of her customers' gestures, and putting a carelessness into the way she received money from them.

Poh Sim and Ah Seng turned to their food, he putting bits of meat and vegetables on her plate, she shaking her head all the time, but accepting the choice morsels, both guided by the memory of what they had seen. The people at the other tables now looked at them not with faintly troubled expressions, but as if they had inadvertently exposed their soft under-bellies. When Poh Sim took up the glass of Chinese tea, daintily, and sipped it as if she was sipping a rare brandy, they too, like the proprietress, shook their heads, wondering at their acquiescence to a vaguely sensed folly, and returned to their meals and conversations.

'Why they turn away?' Poh Sim said, looking at the faces bent over steaming dishes or hovering above the inconsequential flow of words.

'Maybe some darkness frighten them,' Ah Seng said, putting away another sheet into the box.

When they returned to the coffee shop, after days of discussion, they went back with the desire to turn those new anxieties that quivered at the other tables, into reassurance. They remembered the man with the shiny, expensive car, and how the people at the tables had bent down to their meals with barely concealed loathing. He had got out of the car and stood holding the passenger door open; the wife, putting her feet out as if the road was too dirty for her, alighted. They stood stiffly, waiting for their children, who scrambled out, continuing a fight they had started inside. Their hands grasped for holds on the body, but they only left a trail of their sweat on the shiny paint-work. The man hit them then, shouting, 'You want to scratch the car? Not happy until you see lines everywhere?' The woman had stood by, watching, and then taking out a soft, yellow cloth from the glove compartment, wiped off the marks, her lips twisted in disgust.

Poh Sim didn't sit down and wait for Ah Seng that evening. She had discarded her tank top and short skirt for a low-necked, knee-length dress, and she walked up and down in front of their usual table. The proprietress looked across the tables at her. Her son sniggered, but she didn't cuff him.

'Pig's legs!' the boy said, and hooted with knowing laughter.

The proprietress looked at him; he had been like that even when he was a baby. If not for him, she wouldn't be at the counter, her husband not even at her side. Dying when the boy was born, and she thinking she had nothing to live for. And the mirror in the room showing her dishevelled hair, hopeless face, then the boy suddenly kicking and crying there in the cot, as if with some secret knowledge. She had cleaned herself up, discarded her mourning clothes, and gone down to make her entry into the coffee shop business. Everything had been so frightening! The customers most of all taunting her with all those comments. You still young, what! Looking for another man? And when she persisted in not looking at them, Maybe she bring bad luck, lah! Maybe something wrong there, lah! Their sharp eyes had glinted downwards, and their words had cut at her flesh! But she had kept the barbs out, for something else had stirring inside her. Something like a soft longing at her breast; something like a remembrance of strength removed from all that mess and noise that had gone on around the tables. Just like in that woman now, a soft gleam of hope in the folds of all her flesh.

'Look! Look!' her son said, sniggering.

Ah Seng had arrived in an old Toyota Corolla, but though Poh Sim had seen him, she continued to stroll up and down near the table.

'You coming?' Ah Seng shouted.

Poh Sim jerked her head in his direction and gave him a scornful look.

'The car not clean!' she said.

'No need to show temper!' he said, and taking out a soft, yellow cloth from the glove compartment, glossed the doors and windows.

'Now come, lah,' Ah Seng said. 'We'll be late!'

Poh Sim thrust an accusing finger at him.

‘You the late one!’ she shouted. ‘Not I!’

‘Come, lah!’ Ah Seng said.

Poh Sim strode up to the car, tried to lift her skirt daintily, then threw herself into the passenger seat; Ah Seng banged the door shut, went to his side, got in, and they drove off.

The proprietress watched them go, thoughtfully. Ah Seng, behaving like one of her regular customers, had somehow awakened something else in her. He seemed to recall for her the struggle she had had against the glossy rim of some hidden world, against the glinting surface of a zealously guarded pride. And that yellow cloth in his hands, she knew, shaking her head, would be a useless talisman against all the stares that fell on the barren expanse of his wife’s flesh.

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers, having overstayed again, bewitched by the drama, found their earlier wonder and amusement being slowly replaced with misgivings; the painter fidgeted with his cigarette, the finisher barely touched his coffee, and the Stout drinkers gazed away into a diminishing repertoire of lewd jokes. There floated before the construction workers TV screens and radio speakers pouring out futile images and meaningless songs and words into dust-laden living rooms; there floated before the Stout drinkers flapping sarungs and blouses and tattered schoolbags, all shored against the inevitable neatness of bare, middle-class lives.

At the other tables faces rose above the food, the soft, glossy bemusement in the eyes turning into stone-cold stares. The proprietress shivered, remembering her early days at the counter, and reached out and laid her hand on her son’s warm shoulder. The boy looked up at her, then returned to his book, to glimpse figures that had nothing to do with his scrollwork.

The proprietress knew something was amiss when the construction workers and the Stout drinkers didn’t come as often as they had done before, but the tables filled during those hours when the fluorescent lights blazed away at bulging jowls, thick and smooth as wallets. The tables crossed with sharp glints, coming, it seemed to her, from probing eyes and secretly fed appetites. The proprietress, surveyed, pleased, the men not yet out of their work shirts, ties and work-creased trousers or come from thickly-curtained air-conditioned bedrooms, in casual jeans and T-shirts, bristle about the business of ordering food, the wives allowing the rotating wall-fans to riffle, now and then, their loose blouses, with a self-conscious indifference; the children scampering about careful not to crumple the thick protectiveness they had brought from their affluent homes. The proprietress turned her gaze to the table Ah Seng and Poh Sim usually occupied, but they were not there that evening. As she turned back to survey once again the rich and faintly clamorous crowd at the tables, she thought she saw a blade-like stare directed at the couple’s table, but she only saw the Professor who, his children strenuously matching their chess wits at either side of him, was licking his thin lips and gazing, as if disappointed, at some text that had failed to illuminate.

‘No need to wait for them, Ma!’ the proprietress’ son said, giggling at her elbow.

She had been looking out, and wondering at the late evening light that fell on the road and across the empty tables.

'Can't just look, ah?' she said, raising her hand to cuff him.

'You bluffing, Ma,' he said, ducking.

'You read your books now!'

'What for, Ma?'

'So you don't have to do what I'm doing!' she said, thinking of her husband's abruptly snapped-off dreams and the Professor's children, who were always bending over their chess-set or some book.

'Boring, Ma!'

'You read!' she said, remembering her first days in the coffee shop.

Coming out from the dark protectiveness of her room, she had suddenly been struck by all the harsh glitter of cutlery and talk that came from the tables. Feeling a stranger in the dress she wore — she had until then only worn the cheongsam or samfoo — she had gazed at all the bright attractiveness, yet sensed a hidden, corrosive aggression. No, not that vulgar manliness the men had thrust at her, but something more subtle, something that sawed like a rusty knife at her innards. She remembered that rich man, so proud of his shiny car, who had suddenly summoned her to his table one evening. No, not in a rough manner, but with an almost suave flow of words, his teeth bared either in a grin or in an expansive tolerance.

'This the way you train the waiters?' he said, gesturing at the plates, forks and spoons, his family looking on with a smooth indifference.

'I'm new,' she said.

'Nothing to do with being new,' he said, laughing gruffly, and his wife and children giggling behind politely held hands.

'I'll call the waiter,' she said.

'No need,' he said. 'You do it'.

I said 'I'm new'.

'Then time to stop being new!' His wife had laughed then, showing her slightly yellowed teeth. She busied herself at the table, their critical glances sharpening themselves on her, as if they were blades that mustn't lie in idleness.

'All right?' she asked. The man turned a lip-twisted face to her.

'You call this all right?' And she had had to do the work again, until the wife sighed with a desultory satisfaction and the children waved her away with languid playfulness.

The boy looked up at her and, sensing some deep-seated anxiety, bent down to his books. She stood contemplating the yellow light that fell on everything with a razing sullenness. She recalled Ah Seng sitting still and looking reflectively at the yellow sheet of paper he had put into the box, that last time. And Poh Sim fidgeting with the hem of her tank top. She remembered the faces at the other tables, turned towards them with the glaze of a stilled menace. In spite of all the years of watching faces and frenzied movements in the coffee shop for sudden happenings, she had always been defeated by that stillness. The coffee shop would be business and routine for months and then, suddenly, some hostility would burst out between the workers; the coffee shop would be all

calm and smoothness and, suddenly, some violence would flash out from the depths within the customers. Even after she had learned to cast her own subtle air of control over the coffee shop. And there was that larger unpredictable stillness always gathered outside her coffee shop, which she only vaguely understood, and feared.

She saw the construction workers coming in suddenly, bearing an aloofness in their bodies she froze against, and, following them the Stout drinkers, bearing on their faces the tensed, surreptitious laughter she recoiled from.

‘Something going to start, Ma,’ her son said.

‘Your books tell you that?’

‘I just know.’

He had spoken like that too, when the suppressed memories of her husband had come back at her with a stinging vengeance.

‘You be all right, Ma,’ he had said. ‘I can see.’

The construction workers and the Stout drinkers sat within the nearness of some conspiracy, at earshot distance from the couple’s table. The painter took out from the folds of his work-shirt a newspaper packet tied up with a yellow ribbon, and laid it on the table in front of him just as Ah Seng had done with his some time ago. The finisher reached out and fiddled with the ribbon, but the painter struck his hand away, saying, ‘Not time yet!’ That zombie waiter uncoiled himself from the afternoon lethargy and shuffled up to the tables.

‘Drinks?’ he said.

‘I just like sit here,’ the painter said.

‘We waiting for important people, lah,’ the finisher said.

‘Something going to happen, Ma,’ the boy said.

‘Nothing happen in my shop,’ the proprietress said.

‘You just bluffing, Ma!’ the boy said, and, giggling, ‘Look! Look! Nothing happen, huh?’

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had appeared from out of the yellow, mesmerizing evening, and taken their place at the table.

‘Look, Ma, look!’ he said.

‘What to look?’

Then she noticed a taut menace in all that stillness. Though the construction workers and the Stout drinkers didn’t look at Ah Seng and Poh Sim, their every action seemed to be directed at the couple. The painter snapped his fingers, summoning the somnolent waiter.

‘Don’t want our money, ah?’ he said.

‘You said...’ the waiter drawled.

‘I’m saying now!’ the painter said. ‘Bring beer and,’ he pointed to the Indians, ‘bring them Stout.’

The painter then thrust out an insouciant hand and drew the ribbon-tied packet towards him and, leaning forward, said, ‘Want to know what inside?’

The Stout drinkers craned their necks from their table, and one of them said, ‘Funny pictures, ah?’

‘No, lah!’ the painter said. ‘Better than that!’

‘Ma, they up to no good,’ the boy said at the counter.

The painter poured out the beer, when it arrived, in an exaggeratedly dignified way, and the Stout drinkers oohed and aahed every time he let the foam hang in a precipitous quiver at the rim of the glass.

Then the painter raised his glass, and they followed, and all sipped the beer and the Stout, with a contemplative air.

Then they put down their glasses, looked at each other as if they had discovered taste, took paper napkins from the holder, and wiped their mouths, daintily.

The proprietress, contemplating them, felt herself drawn towards some familiar and yet frightening emotion; the boy kept his steady eyes on them.

The painter hunched forward in his chair, and undid the ribbon on the packet.

The sheets were clippings from a Chinese newspaper that was fond of publishing sensational news and, sometimes, outrageous scoop pictures. The painter smoothed them out as if they were dry, crackling parchment, with obvious delight.

‘Magic show, ah?’ one of the Stout drinkers said.

‘Real show, lah,’ he said, drawing out and displaying a sheet. ‘Where you can see like this one?’

It was covered with the graphic deformities of the crippled: swollen, hanging lips, fan-like ears, enlarged, bumpy foreheads, pendulous, slack breasts, elephantine, stony legs, and jutting, craggy knees.

‘Wah, wah!’ the finisher said. ‘You really find it this time, man!’

‘This even better, lah!’ the painter said, drawing out and displaying another sheet filled with human freaks: the Cyclops-eyed, the double-headed, the four-legged, two of them hanging from the waist like questioning appendages, and the feet of a man, splayed and cleft like hoofs of some mythical horse.

The construction workers and the Stout drinks oohed and aahed at the tables.

The proprietress saw that Ah Seng and Poh Sim had come out of their mesmerized state, and were watching and listening to them with fear and a puzzled embarrassment.

‘They up to no good, Ma!’ the boy said.

‘Shouldn’t have such paper near them,’ the proprietress said.

‘This one really shiok, lah!’ the painter, taking out a photograph of a couple caught in the garish light of a nightclub. The woman was fat beyond the compass of the camera, and the man was a stick-like grasshopper crawling, lost, against all that flesh.

The other construction workers and the Stout drinkers oohed and aahed, with quivering appreciation.

‘I really dig this, man!’ a Stout drinker said, rising and peering over the shoulders of the others.

The painter waved the photographer’s grotesque humour above his head.

‘Everybody see already?’ the painter said.

Ah Seng stood up then, and rushed up to their table and seized the sheaf of obscene images.

‘Wah, he like them so much!’ the finisher said.

'Don't make fun!' Ah Seng said.

'Who making fun?' the painter said, standing up.

'There going to be fight, Ma!'

'Nobody fight in my place,' she said, going up to the tables, but even as she did so she felt that strange bristling of familiar yet primitive hackles in the air. Like that time that rich customer had called her to his table. She had come among the painter, the finisher, the cement mixer, the other construction workers and the Stout drinkers, inevitably, as into the midst of the smoky figures she had avoided for so long. They had lain beneath the skin of those rich people who came smacking their lips and gazing about in an unseeing way, and now she saw them rearing in the hidden darkness of those people around her.

'Tell them that!' she heard the painter say, in a voice she thought came from a more recent primitiveness. A primitiveness that she had seen in the shine of car ownership, in the languor of women sitting within their sulky possessiveness, and in the dull pride in stubby fingers and spade-wielding dexterity. 'They not using this place like a coffee shop.'

'They using this place like a dirty cinema!' she heard Ah Seng say, and thrust into her hands the sheaf of newspaper photographs. She gazed at them, at first with curiosity and then with a feeling that surpassed disgust and pity.

She raised her head and looked at Poh Sim, who sat there at her table, within flesh that trembled with a primordial and statuesque indignation. The proprietress turned to the construction workers.

'This make you something?' she said.

'They make us nothing!' the painter said. 'You not ashamed?'

'You make yourself nothing!'

'You pay for this!' the painter said.

'You pay for your drinks before you go!'

She waited. The construction workers and the Stout drinkers stood up, and their hands, turning into demeaning muscle, threw money on the tables; and their hips and legs, turning into hurt dignity, thrust their way out of the shop.

Ah Seng returned to his table, and took Poh Sim's hand and caressed it with a child's unselfconscious concern. When the proprietress turned to them, they looked at her, Poh Sim with a trembling gratitude on her lips, and Ah Seng with the glimmer of a strange joy on his face. The proprietress smiled at them in some confusion, and walked slowly back to the counter.

'You be all right, Ma,' the boy said, turning a bright and serious face to her. 'You really you just now.'

The proprietress didn't notice it at first, the subtle dimming of the light that fell on everything in the coffee shop, after her confrontation with the construction workers and the Stout drinkers. The couple had stayed away for a few days, of course, temporarily robbing the coffee shop of some of its colour, but that was only to be expected. The waiters moved about more slowly among the customers, sometimes even knocking into the tables, as if they were pre-occupied with some part of themselves they had just remembered. Her regular customers, that anonymous crowd, sat looking restlessly into the night air or talking quietly among themselves. Her other, more affluent patrons had begun to

drop off, and those who still came sat with at their meals absent-mindedly, as if they were in a hurry to get somewhere else. The Professor still came with his children, but they too, were, for some reason, restive.

Then Ah Seng and Poh Sim appeared with that look on their faces. It didn't puzzle her anymore, for she had meditated on it, looking into the silence that fell into the coffee shop during its off-peak hours. But it had a strange effect on the customers. If it irritated and even made her desperate, it only awakened an abrasive and sinewy sullenness in the other customers. A hand would lie loosely, potently, beside a steaming dish, or a leg thrust itself beyond the table with a faintly hostile insouciance. The Professor too, leaned unnecessarily heavily on his children, telling them not to fidget or gaze about emptily.

The couple had been coming regularly, late in the evenings, Ah Seng carrying his shoulder bag, and Poh Sim wearing a low-necked dress that struggled to keep in her breasts, waist and thighs. He brought out the yellow packet and folded and put away a couple of sheets. And they always smiled in her direction, as if she was a mirror propped up on the counter beside the cash-register. When they sat there, their faces shining with that strange and innocent desire, they somehow provoked wary shoulders and more contemptuous lips, at the other tables. It was then the menacing stillness the proprietress sensed just outside her coffee shop, came to whisper among the tables.

She had been standing behind the cash-register, listening to that quivering stillness, when she saw the barren couple walk into the shop. He hadn't rung up and ordered a special menu — they came only during anniversaries — and he didn't bear a gift in his hand. He smiled at her, pulled out a chair for his wife, and looked at the table where the couple sat, under the distracting glow of all that self-belief.

Even as she gazed, wondering, at that unannounced arrival, she heard the BMW drive up and park beside the shop.

'The car-man here also, Ma!' her son said, his breath warm and uncertain at her elbow. 'They strange, lah, today.'

The family didn't enact the drama of snobbery and pride of possession; instead, there was about them, as they trooped to a table and sat down, a sulky heaviness. The man glanced at the couple and then at the people at the other tables, with a brief but chastising glare. They seemed to recoil as if into some pool of memory, for their faces suddenly acquired a spreading and knowing glaze. The anniversary man turned and presented to the woman a blush, instead of a rose, in token of some recognition.

'I don't like this, Ma,' the boy said.

'I too,' the proprietress said. 'I don't like it when all that whispering from outside, comes.'

'What whispering, Ma?'

'You'll see when you grow up,' she said, looking fearfully at the tables.

'I see already!' the boy said, giggling. 'They playing hide-and-seek!'

Her son's words didn't surprise her, only made her guess at the hidden feelings that came like a wash to her customer's faces.

That re-immersion in recent memory had brought an infectious confidence to the tables. They shone now with the glitter of certainty, some blunt, some sharp, as if in the dimness of some back room. The car-man looked again at the tables, and then looked in front of him as at some invisible onion-paper blue print. There came from the other tables a whisper, as imperceptible as a muscle straining at the smell of action. The anniversary man soothed his wife, as a midwife would talk to a woman in fruitless labour, cajoling and falsely hopeful. She bared her fleshy lips, not so much in pain as in a pretended forbearance. The Professor, who had appeared at his table with his children almost as a subtext, now leaned forward and roused them into an academic watchfulness.

The car-man snapped his fingers, a marble reflection of the painter, and a waiter hurried to him, but he only shook his head and gestured towards the counter.

'I don't like this, Ma,' the boy said.

The waiter came and said, 'He wants you.'

She recalled that time he had summoned her, and felt once again the sawing harshness of the eyes round the table.

'You do everything properly?' she said, turning on the waiter.

But that humbled, cringing look on his face only told her that he had just come from the presence of some disturbing power.

'You look after the cash register,' she told the boy, and left the counter.

'You be careful, Ma!' the boy called after her.

She glanced at Ah Seng and Poh Sim as she went past them, and saw that their shining desire had dipped into a dull, bewildered fear.

When she reached the car-man's table and looked at him, she saw something else: she saw the dark whispers she feared so much swim into sharp lines around his lips and the corners of his eyes. And on the faces of the wife and children, it appeared as a smooth assertion of some unshakable right. No scathing appraisal came from around the table, this time; only the falling into place with the sharp clicks of the tongue of some profound indignation.

'You running a proper place?' the man said, looking up at her with eyes that had in them not the shine of the car he drove, but of some chain extending beyond metal and sinking into the flesh of men and women.

'Nobody complain,' she said.

'Nobody complain?' he said. 'You don't see. You don't learn.'

'What to learn?'

'That people are not coming here,' he said.

'Business like that. Sometimes up, sometimes down,' she said.

'Not when you run your business properly.'

'I just a woman.'

'That why you let all kinds of people into this place?'

'What kind of people?'

'All that flesh there,' the man said, thrusting a nod at the couple's table.

'They still people.'

'Still people?' his voice rose, and from the other tables came a clamour like a clash of echoes.

‘Still customers. They pay.’

‘Paying imitations?’ the man said.

‘Behind our back?’ the cracked voice of dignity shouted from another table.

The proprietress turned round and looked at the other tables; faces were turned in her direction as towards some unimaginable obscenity. The proprietress was reminded of the newspaper pictures Ah Seng had thrust into her hands: she saw the gruesome single-eyed, the many-handed, the false-voiced, the narrow-minded, and the sickly, sun-hidden skins.

Ah Seng and Poh Sim had somehow appeared at her side. The faces turned towards them, lips twisted by some deeply-rooted self-loathing, eyes blinking away some ugliness they saw in themselves, and voices raised in some unforgivable self-vengeance.

‘These people?’ several voices said.

The Professor sat forward, as if to get a fuller grasp of some new text on social realism. He kept saying to his children, ‘Don’t miss a single detail!’

‘Why you scold this good lady?’ Ah Seng said.

‘She only got affectionate heart,’ Poh Sim said.

The laughter from the tables, when it finally came, didn’t resemble anything that had been heard in that coffee shop. It crackled like overpowered neon signs, fell to the floor like faulty crackers, and wheezed about there like damp, ineffective explosives.

‘Why you laugh at us?’

But the hollow wheezing went on.

‘Flesh is flesh!’ Ah Seng shouted.

But the wheezing wouldn’t stop.

‘You can’t talk to reflections, Ah Seng,’ Poh Sim said above the noise of all that catharsis.

The proprietress laid a hand on Poh Sim’s shoulder.

‘Go from this shop,’ she said. ‘Take him away. Don’t come back.’

In the silence after their departure, the proprietress turned to the car-man.

‘Shall I take your order, Sir?’

‘You’re learning. At last.’

The proprietress stood behind the counter, looking at the construction workers and the Stout drinkers, who had returned. The yellow bands of the evening lay on the street, just outside the shop, and behind them those dark whispers she would have to be vigilant against. Later in the evening, the car-man would come; he had promised in his suave, possessive manner, and the anniversary man had rung up to say he would need a special menu. She sighed.

‘You did right, Ma,’ the boy said at her elbow.

‘Your books say that?’

‘Something else, Ma.’

‘What else did it say?’

‘To be careful of a boy growing too fast!’

Ah Seng and Poh Sim sat at their old, peeling Formica table, drinking Chinese tea out of chipped mugs.

‘Why the shop lady ask us not to go there anymore?’ Poh Sim said, her flesh spilling all over the stool.

‘Better here forever than there for a short while,’ Ah Seng said.

‘You go to the priest again?’

‘No, I just go to myself.’

‘Reflections?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘This nothingness?’

‘Not yet,’ he said, drawing the box filled with the yellow sheets towards him. ‘Must burn them at the family altar.’

‘Our family altar,’ she said, looking at him from inside all that flesh.